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RODRIGUEZ An education at the Esquire Show Bar

CONTINUED FROM E4

The long interviews with the likes of John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Earl Hines, Curtis Mayfield, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Billy Cobham, Herbie Hancock and, my favourite, Rahsaan Roland Kirk were an education I wanted to share with readers. The interviews resulted in block-long queues of boomers seeking to connect with the real deal. This seemed to miff rock fans to no end. I wasn't giving them their weekly confirmation that rock was where it was at.

The Esquire — a funky House of Good Music, its white columns draped like palm trees — was the last vestige of Montreal's 1940s/early-'50s heyday as a city that never slept. Crusty, cigar-chomping mumbler Norm Silver managed the joint. He had eyes bulging out of dark bags, and a large nose over which he wore Groucho glasses. The desk in Silver's closet-sized office was cluttered with scrapbooks, 8x10 glossies, bits of notepaper, and the requisite issues of Variety and Cashbox. In the lobby, with its Wall of Fame, he mumbled inquiries about whether so-and-so would draw and shrugged off credit for a sparkling booking: "I just thought we'd do something different."

The ghosts of big names — Bill Haley, Little Richard, Fats Domino, the Coasters, Wilson Pickett, Joe Tex, Junior Walker, Sam and Dave, Martha and the Vandellas, Duke Ellington, Count Basie — enveloped me whenever I walked in. I felt much like Robert Charlebois must have before he became a Quebec superstar; he once said the Esquire was "essential to my career." (At 14 he snuck in wearing a fake moustache, and in 1968 he played there for a week, sharing the house attendance record with Pickett.)

When Kirk left the Esquire's stage near the end of his set, playing New Orleans clarinet through the crowd and onto Stanley St., Silver muttered, "Kinda makes you feel good."

My memory of the blind Kirk remains incandescent. A perennial poll winner in multi-instrumentalist categories, he literally wore his instruments on stage. I can still hear his cranky voice; I see him brooding beneath bulbous shades and breathing heavily. He preferred small hotel rooms so he could be closer to his stuff, which he arranged neatly in specific places on his bed and dresser. He could find what he was looking for faster than asking you to look for it. He introduced me to snuff, said it cleared out the nasal passages. He explained how circular breathing enabled him to play two, three horns at once. He spoke to me low and tender, patiently, filling me in on what I needed to know about jazz, gesticulating wildly and sermonizing like a prophet, using the element of surprise to keep you off guard or draw you in.

GEORGE BIRO MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

The legendary Esquire Show Bar (pictured in 1969) on lower Stanley St. was the site of countless visits by R&B and jazz giants.

MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

Esquire manager Norm Silver in 1972: "I just thought we'd do something different."

HENRY J. KAISER, MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

An encounter with jazz multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk (seen in 1977) was a revelation.

"Any time you try to change anybody's way of thinking when they've been set in a certain little bag, you destroyin' the bag," he told me. "So if I play two horns, I shouldn't be doing it, according to the critics, because Stan Getz wasn't playing two horns. So the first thing they say (is) 'It's a gimmick, he's just trying to be different.' They can't think of nuthin' else to say. People have hang-ups about people being blind, too. They say, 'He's got to be good 'cause he's blind; he's got to have extra perfect pitch.' Well, all that stuff don't necessarily have to be true, because music is work. Anything takes work.

"I believe that people should be entertained, as long as it's not diverting too much from the music. I don't spin pop bottles on my head or anything. The music should be carried all over the club, all over the street. I think that when we come back in off the street, there should be people coming in with us. ... If I hear a man on the street and he's powerful enough with his music, I stop and listen to him. 'Cause it's interesting to hear music out in the air, unexpectedly. To me, it's intriguing. But people don't have imagination no more. Like when I used to sit for hours to hear Sonny Rollins on the radio from New York City, I just imagined. It didn't have to be true, whatever I imagined, but nobody could take it away from me.

"When Wes Montgomery played, it was sheer pain to stretch your fingers like that. Pain. Now all you have to do is press a button to get that Wes Montgomery sound. It's pitiful that we have let our minds get so unimaginative that we fail for something like that. And if I didn't have a horn, I could do something naturally with my hands and get a sound. That's just the way I feel about things.

"When you go through so much, and when you see all the things you go through, you can't be nuthin' else but free."

One night I staggered into the Esquire around midnight, after reviewing another dismal show, to catch Bo Diddley's second set. I was relieved to watch his timeless R&R antics. In peace — or so I thought. A stomper had everyone on their feet — except me. Big Bad Bo spotted me at the back of the room leaning head on hand, elbow on table. "Hey you!" he pointed. "What's the matter? You suffrin' from lockjaw?" The crowd cracked up. Laughs that lightened me up when I needed it most. Thanks, Bo.

On May 5, 1973, Quebec's liquor cops raided the Esquire, newspaper photographers in tow, and charged it as a hookers' haven. When I arrived, at 2:30 a.m., Silver was in shock, nursing a bottle of scotch he'd hidden. "It's deeply embarrassing. I think I've earned a reputation as an honourable man ... not that I want to place a halo around my head. But friends ask, 'Normie, what did you do wrong?' "

For the first time ever, I heard him raise his voice: "Around the corner, what do you find? Topless! But they have a license!"

The Esquire closed that December; a year later, Silver had open-heart surgery. He died in 1980 at 69. "When they took away his club," said house booker Roy Cooper, "they more or less took away his will to live." And Montreal lost part of its soul.

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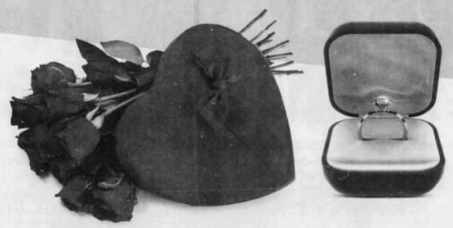

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